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John Charvet - The Nature and Limits of Human Equality

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Book Review: John Charvet – The Nature and Limits of Human Equality

Within normative political philosophy equality (possibly together with justice) is probably the concept that has received the most attention over the past 25 years. Debates regarding different forms of egalitarianism, the point of equality, and the nature of equality have recently somewhat dominated the discipline. On top of that, as John Charvet (1) points out on the very first page of his book *The Nature and Limits of Human Equality*, contemporary political philosophers seem to largely agree that ‘all serious thought about political ethics ... must begin with a belief in human equality’. No matter whether one is a right-libertarian, a hardnosed luck-egalitarian, a Rawlsian liberal, or a normative realist the basic equality of all human beings is most of the times taken for granted. However, according to Charvet this fundamental commitment to basic equality is hardly ever adequately justified, and even if it is, the answers provided leave much to be desired, since there seems to exist an argumentative gap, or even a tension, between theorists’ commitments to basic equality and egalitarian justice.

In his book, Charvet sets out to not only provide us with a detailed account of basic equality and where it originates, but also to present us with a new and unique account of how basic equality and egalitarian political ethics, that is the equal distribution of equal rights and duties amongst free citizens, go together. In other words, *The Nature and Limits of Human Equality* is an extremely ambitious book, since Charvet does not only criticise virtually all of contemporary political philosophy for failing to justify basic equality adequately, but he also argues that none of the existing theories can adequately derive the principles of social and political equality from their supposed arguments for basic equality. Hence, what we need according to Charvet is an entirely new liberal communitarian perspective for correctly identifying the basis, nature and limits of human equality.

Charvet’s critical investigation of mainstream political philosophy’s commitment to basic human equality is a welcome addition to the literature, since basic equality is one of the blind spots of contemporary theorising. While there has been in recent years a noticeable increase in papers and books dealing with the issue of basic equality and its justification (see for example Carter 2011; 2013; Steinhoff 2014; Aronovitch 2015), the idea of basic human equality and how it relates to social and political equality is still somewhat under-researched. Moreover, the idea that all human beings are morally equal is certainly not without controversy, as for instance the existing literature on animal rights and speciesism clearly shows. Richard Arneson (2014) even calls the idea of basic equality ‘neither acceptable nor rejectable’. Charvet, however, is not concerned with the controversial issue of whether humans are different from non-humans: instead, Charvet is concerned that a) a commitment to basic equality does not necessarily imply a commitment to social and political equality,

and b) that existing liberal justifications for basic equality fail to explain how social and political equality follows from their particular commitment to and justification of basic equality. It is in this field that Charvet sees the surplus his book delivers.

The first chapter sets the scene for the argument of the book. Charvet starts from the observation that nowadays equality has become an almost ubiquitous cornerstone of moral theory. At the same time, Charvet observes that existing theories often unhelpfully collapse different forms of equality into one. Charvet suggests (2) that we need to carefully differentiate between our commitment to equality as part of what it is for people to interact ethically, which entails that 'each person's interests must count equally in the determination of the scheme's system of rights and duties', and the 'egalitarian standpoint of modern political philosophy', i.e. the ideal of a just society as a society of free and equal citizens who enjoy equal *substantive rights*. According to Charvet, recent discussions of equality have focused on the latter (while neglecting the former), leading to the familiar debates of what the currency of egalitarian justice should be, which role luck and desert should play in an egalitarian theory, and how fairness, respect and equality are related to each other.

In chapter two, Charvet briefly goes back to Ancient ethics, claiming that Plato and Aristotle both were committed to the idea of equal interest consideration, but that their respective perfectionism led them to adopt hierarchical social organisations as the system of choice for advancing the overall good (i.e. virtue). Thus, in Plato's and Aristotle's case we find one sort of commitment to equality (i.e. equal interest consideration) without the other kind of commitment to equality (i.e. equal substantive rights for all members of society). Thus, Charvet claims, liberals are wrong if they think basic equality naturally provides an argument for social and political equality.

According to Charvet (38), we can witness a major shift in philosophical thinking about equality in the work of John Locke, who claims that in the state of nature all people enjoy a kind of natural jurisdictional equality. For Charvet, it is this idea of basic (rather than natural) jurisdictional equality which also informs much of today's political philosophy, including the modelling of John Rawls's famous original position in *A Theory of Justice*. The important question though is, on the basis of which feature or property should all people have this claim to basic jurisdictional equality. In Locke's case the answer seems to be that people display the 'moral and intellectual capacity to direct themselves in accordance with the dictates of natural law' (40). This, however, seems to be a threshold conception, which would require further argument as to why differences in people's capacity to direct themselves according to what natural law prescribes do not matter. According to Charvet, a similar problem looms large for contemporary theories of equality.

Throughout chapter three Charvet considers and dismisses existing liberal individualist accounts of equal human worth, arguing that theorists such as Vlastos, Dworkin, Rawls and Williams

all advance a variant of what Charvet calls the standard justification of equality. The standard argument holds that all humans are objectively valuable in virtue of some property they possess, such as agency, moral personality, or something similar. In this respect all humans are equal and equally valuable. From this basic equality liberals then deduce claims to equal substantive rights. According to Charvet, all variants of the standard argument face several problems. First, in explaining why the valuable-making property which humans seem to possess to varying degrees should either be considered a range property, that is a property which one either possesses or not and which does not allow for degrees of possession, or why degrees of possession should be considered to be morally irrelevant. After all, if some people are better moral agents than others this could entail that they are also more valuable agents than others. Second, and possibly more importantly Charvet claims that all liberal individualists attach (in an attempt to circumvent the first problem) an individual's objective value to the individual's subjective capacity of making itself an end for itself, which – as this is a process that can happen in isolation from other agents – does not explain why an individual should consider everybody else's interests as important as its own, let alone ground equal substantive rights. Therefore, Charvet concludes, liberal individualism creates an irresolvable tension between the individual's ultimate worth based on its capacity to make itself an end for itself, and the impartial requirement of treating all individuals as equals.

However, this analysis rests on a rather strongly subjectivist reading of how ultimate moral worth is connected to an individual's capacity for being an end for itself. According to Charvet, ultimate moral worth is *created* through the individual's *self-relation*, which raises the question why the individual should be in equal relation to others, just because these others have the same value-bestowing self-relation. On a different reading, though, individualist liberals do not claim that objective value is 'created' through a particular self-relation, but that it is the individual's capacity for moral agency with its potential for practical freedom which should be considered valuable in an objective way. Charvet only very briefly considers this line of reasoning (while discussing Ian Carter's account of opacity of respect) and dismisses it, claiming that moral agency is possessed to different degrees, which means that then surely some people should be more valuable than others. However, this conclusion seems premature, since the capacity for moral agency could well be conceived of as a range property, since it is only the realisation of this very basic human capacity which exists to different degrees. These nuanced distinctions, though, do not get enough attention in the book.

The core of Charvet's own theory is presented in chapter four, in which he argues for a liberal communitarianism which holds that the worth of individuals only arises when individuals are members of an ethical community, in which they are recognised as ends by the other members of the community. As Charvet (75) puts it, 'the ethical worth of individuals and their claim to rights arise from

their membership in a community of persons committed to interacting on ethical terms' meaning 'that it is the collective will of the members that bestows this status on individuals identified as members' (76). An ethical community is, according to Charvet, a group which is committed to interacting on ethical terms, that is to treat every member's interests equally so as to promote the good of each individual and the common good. For most liberals such a view will set several alarm bells off, since Charvet seems to hold that not only social and political rights only arise within the context of an ethical community but also an individual's claim to moral worth and basic moral rights, which raises the question of who decides what counts as interacting on ethical terms, who defines initial membership and what happens if one is unlucky enough to be born into circumstances in which the community one is part of does not treat every person's interests equally. Moreover, as Charvet himself readily admits his liberal communitarianism is perfectly compatible with hierarchical societies of a quasi-Platonic kind, in which individuals are assigned particular roles and duties. While Charvet argues that more individualist egalitarian ethical communities are better suited to fully realise equality and to promote people's self-identification with the project of the ethical community, he admits (80) that as long as the distribution of rights and duties within the community can be justified with reference to each member's own good even (widely) hierarchical and unequal ethical communities are possible. Charvet tries to limit the reach of these inequalities by stating that the distribution of rights and duties within an ethical community must be pareto-optimal, that is, nobody should be able to 'improve his position [and the overall good] by altering the scheme of rights and duties' (81). However, this pareto-optimality condition is introduced without much argument, so as it stands it seems at least doubtful that it can be justified through Charvet's own account of basic equality as membership in an ethical community. Furthermore, while Charvet argues that any scheme an ethical community establishes must be 'justifiable to each person in terms of her own good' (80), this condition might be weaker than it seems since it seems impossible to ascertain what a particular person's good is outside of the particular community she finds herself in.

In general, Charvet provides a rather unapologetic community-based account of basic equality which certainly is a thought-provoking alternative to mainstream liberal theories. Moreover, Charvet's liberal communitarianism avoids many of the pitfalls of older versions of communitarianism, as Charvet skilfully argues in chapter five. Thus, Charvet for instance holds that while individuals only develop through being in a community the power of reflective self-control, they can use this power to actually detach themselves from their original community, a claim that runs against overly essentialist and culturalist forms of communitarianism. Chapter six and chapter seven deal with issues of global justice. While chapter six is a brief overview of cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan liberal theories, chapter seven explains how Charvet's liberal communitarianism fits into the existing literature.

Charvet argues that his liberal communitarianism sees states as the most suitable vehicle for advancing the good of politically independent ethical communities, but that this does not mean that states as such should be considered valuable. While Charvet's explanations regarding the global politics of liberal communitarianism are interesting, as a reader, though, one's mind is still stuck in chapter four, which covered too much ground too quickly and seemed to leave several pressing questions unanswered. For instance, Charvet did not engage in enough depth with some of the obvious criticisms a community-based account of moral worth and basic equality will get, such as what happens to minorities in existing communities, or how we can rule out slave-owner societies as unethical without any prior commitment to equality (or other values), or why ethical interaction should take the form that Charvet prescribes.

Therefore, while Charvet's book is an intriguing read for all those interested in questions of basic equality, its proposed solution will leave some readers unsatisfied, since there remain a host of open and pressing questions. All in all, the book successfully shows that we should spend more time thinking about the very basis of our egalitarian commitments, even if the book at times struggles to cover all the ground it so ambitiously set out to conquer.

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